

Phyllis A. Whitney—

A Migrant Virginia Novelist

With a Sense of Epiphany and Hemi-Syncs

A

by Christine Andreea

As novelist Phyllis Ayame Whitney tells it, five years ago, she woke up in the middle of the night and thought, "Why don't we buy some land in Virginia, build some houses, and move down there?" She pauses artfully, smiles, then delivers the punch line in her high, sweet voice: "And so we did."

No doubt she has told the story countless times to interviewers, but there is still wonder in her voice. She conveys a sense of epiphany. Like the experienced storyteller she is, Whitney knows what to leave out: the endless, tedious complications of a move that involved relocating and building not one, but two houses. Whitney's daughter, Georgia Pearson and her family, joined her mother in her move from suburban Long Island to the Blue Ridge mountains south of Charlottesville. At the time, Whitney was 83. Now 88, she makes it all sound easy: an impromptu, romantic adventure with an intriguing beginning and a satisfying end. ("I *love* Virginia," she says happily.) It's the kind of tale her readership has come to expect.

In the past 50 years, Whitney has published 74 books, including two guides for fiction writers. Her novels have been translated into 23 languages; in this country over 40 million editions

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Phyllis A. Whitney, 1992

in paperback alone have been printed. A collection of all editions of her work takes up an entire wall of bookshelves in her spacious study. About half of the books are "juveniles"—books geared toward teenage audiences. But Whitney no longer writes for young people. ("I

Ken Bennett Photo

got so tired of teenage love," she explains.)

Her adult fiction is not easily typed. Once categorized as "romantic suspense," it is currently marketed as "psychological suspense." Whitney herself prefers to call them "mysteries." There is a mystery in all of them, she says. Moreover, in 1988 Mystery Writers of America awarded Whitney the title of Grand Master for Lifetime Achievement. The following year, Whitney won an "Agatha" from Malice Domestic, an annual convention of (mostly) women mystery writers and fans who prefer "soft-boiled" to "hard-boiled"—Drambuie versus Scotch, as *Washington Post* reporter Sarah Booth Conroy tactfully put it.

There is no Mean Street dialogue in Whitney's books, and she avoids graphic descriptions of both violence and sex. On the other hand, she does not cater to the Drambuie crowd looking for clues in Colonel Mustard's conservatory. She states that, as a rule, she does not like detective novels. She finds sorting out clues tiresome. What interests her, she says, is character and relationships—although most writers of detective/crime fiction would claim the same interest.

Whose novels does she admire? She mentions Barbara Mertz (a.k.a. Barbara Michaels and Elizabeth Peters) and Mary Stewart. But Whitney's North Star, the reference point by which she has navigated her career, is the late Dame Daphne du Maurier's 1938 best-seller *Rebecca*.

In book shops, the browser is more likely to find Phyllis A. Whitney titles in the romance section (where turquoise and flamingo pink spines predominate) than in the mystery section (an assortment of Crayola colors). Certainly Whitney's titles are romantic: *Woman Without a Past*, *The Singing Stones*, *Rainbow in the Mist*, *Feather on the Moon*, *Silversword*, *Flaming Tree*, to cite her most recent offerings. Moreover, the covers of the paperback editions often display fabulously maned, chesty women in nightgowns—or are they slips? But under the covers, as it were, there are no heaving bosoms or throbbing manhoods. Romance, for Whitney, is not steamy. She is a 19th century sort of romantic, inspired by the

grandeur of nature, drawn towards mystery of the unknown. She is fascinated with the dark side of the human spirit as well as its unexplored potential. Things para-psychological intrigue her. For *Singing Stones*, which is set in Nelson County where she lives, Whitney underwent a hypnotic regression into a past life of a Colorado woman in the last century, then used the experience to further her plot. In *Rainbow in the Mist*, she explores the metaphysical properties of crystals; in *Woman Without a Past*, she employs a psychic who "channels" strategic information from a spirit on "the other side." Occasionally, a fan will write and protest: "You ought to read the Bible."

In her own life, Whitney is an advocate of alternative healing methods. A small, delicately-boned woman, she claims to have had "good luck" treating sciatic nerve pain with large magnets whose negative poles "pull oxygen into the cells." A self-described "nutrition buff," she swallows 86 vitamins and food supplements each day—"at last count," she jokes. Her latest novel, *Ebony Swan*, features a nutritional doctor among its cast of characters.

Whitney's espousal of innovative healing methods stems not only from her own health problems (she is hypoglycemic—a low blood-sugar condition that caused headaches and blackouts before she learned to control it through her diet). Ten years ago, a teenaged grandson named Michael attempted suicide. The boy lived, but suffered severe brain damage and was written off as a "vegetable" by conventional doctors. Whitney and her daughter, Georgia Pearson, however, turned to experimental therapies—diet and exercises designed to "reprogram" the brain. Whitney claims no large miracle, but she does say that her grandson has "improved far more than we ever expected."

Thanks to the income earned from her books, Whitney has been able to keep Michael at home. Her new house, a modest-looking contemporary structure that rambles along the top of a ridge (the architect was a grandson-in-law), has a ground floor apartment designed to meet Michael's needs. Whitney and her daughter, who lives next door, oversee

...she swallows
86 vitamins
and food
supplements
each day—

Phyllis Whitney,
Yokohama, Japan,
circa 1906



an around-the-clock staff of nurses' aides. Whitney made fictional use of the family tragedy in *Flaming Tree*, a deeply-felt novel set in Carmel, California. Its heroine is a physical therapist who works with brain-injured children.

Whitney's heroines are usually in their mid-thirties and often recovering from some personal trauma—the death of a fiancé, say, or an unwanted divorce. They are independent women, if not ardent feminists. They tend to have careers in service professions (children's librarian, clinical psychologist) or the arts. A recent heroine, Molly Hunt of *Woman Without a Past* is herself a writer of mystery novels.

In *Woman Without a Past*, Charles, one of the male leads, criticizes Molly's latest novel: "You're a good writer except when it comes to your hero. I think you could have done better there."

"I'm not writing for men," Molly replies stiffly. "Women readers seem to enjoy my books."

"Sure—Mr. Rochester and good old Heathcliff are always popular. But not exactly up to date."

Molly's reaction: "I hadn't asked for his criticism and I didn't want it."

Phyllis Whitney insists that Molly is not a self-portrait and that she wrote this

passage with tongue firmly in cheek. Nonetheless, dark, broody types do have a way of recurring in her books. Their craggy, troubled exteriors, however, do not always harbor a noble spirit. In *The Fire and the Gold*, a juvenile novel set in San Francisco at the time of the 1906 earthquake, the darkly handsome male turns out to be a self-serving creep. Still, the heroine (another writer) admits to her (blond) suitor at the end of the tale, "...a little part of me will always remember him." Heathcliffs are hard to shake.

As for the critics, Whitney says she ignores them. "They are not my readership," she explains, her voice dry. "If they write a flattering review, why then of course I think they're very intelligent and I'm very happy. But if they damn me, which they often do, then I think that they just don't understand this kind of book."

At 88, she is starting her 75th book.

Phyllis Ayame Whitney was born in 1903 in Yokohama, Japan to American parents. (Her middle name, Ayame, means Iris in Japanese.) Her father, Charles Joseph Whitney, managed hotels and her mother, Lillian Mandeville, was an actress. She was also a strong-minded woman with a penchant for championing the underdog. As Phyllis Whitney tells it, one day her mother encountered a black woman weeping in a Japanese railroad station. The woman's fiancé had abandoned her. Galvanized into action by the injustice, Lillian brought the woman home with her and installed her as Phyllis' nurse.

"When I was twelve," Whitney recalls, "I began making up stories and writing them down on paper. At the time, I was going to a missionary school in China, and one of the teachers there encouraged me. It went to my head and I've been writing ever since! But it was a long, long time before I was published."

Whitney's present success did not come easily. By the time she was 15, both parents had died. There was no money for college, so she went to work in a book shop in Chicago, where she lived with an aunt. ("It was probably better for me than college would have been," she reflects wryly.) She wrote children's book reviews for the *Chicago Sun* and

"Usually I start out knowing 'who dun it'..."

hundreds of short stories which earned her more rejections than sales. "I had terrible feelings of inferiority," she says. "People put me down so much when I was young. They'd say, 'You're not very bright. You're only a girl, what can you do?'"

At 21, she married a man who disapproved of her writing. Nineteen years later, after the publication of Whitney's first novel, they divorced. The book, *A Place for*

Anne, was issued as a juvenile. "And people put that down, too," she remembers. "The same way some male writers and editors look down their noses at women's books. But I was determined to be somebody, to show them, and I did. And now I don't have any worries on that score at all."

Whitney married again, this time to Lovell F. Jahnke, a Mobile Oil executive. Jahnke was supportive of her work and helped her manage her burgeoning success. He accompanied her on trips around the world to gather material for her books. She

wrote an average of two books a year, one juvenile, one adult. Often she saved legwork by using the same setting for both. Whitney was widowed in 1973. After the move to Virginia, she has "slowed down" to one book a year. At 88, she is starting her 75th book.

To what does she attribute her productivity? Her answer is emphatic and down-to-earth: "I can not sew, I can not garden, I can not cook, I hate all those things. I can only write. And if you are single-minded in purpose, after a while you get a lot of words behind you."

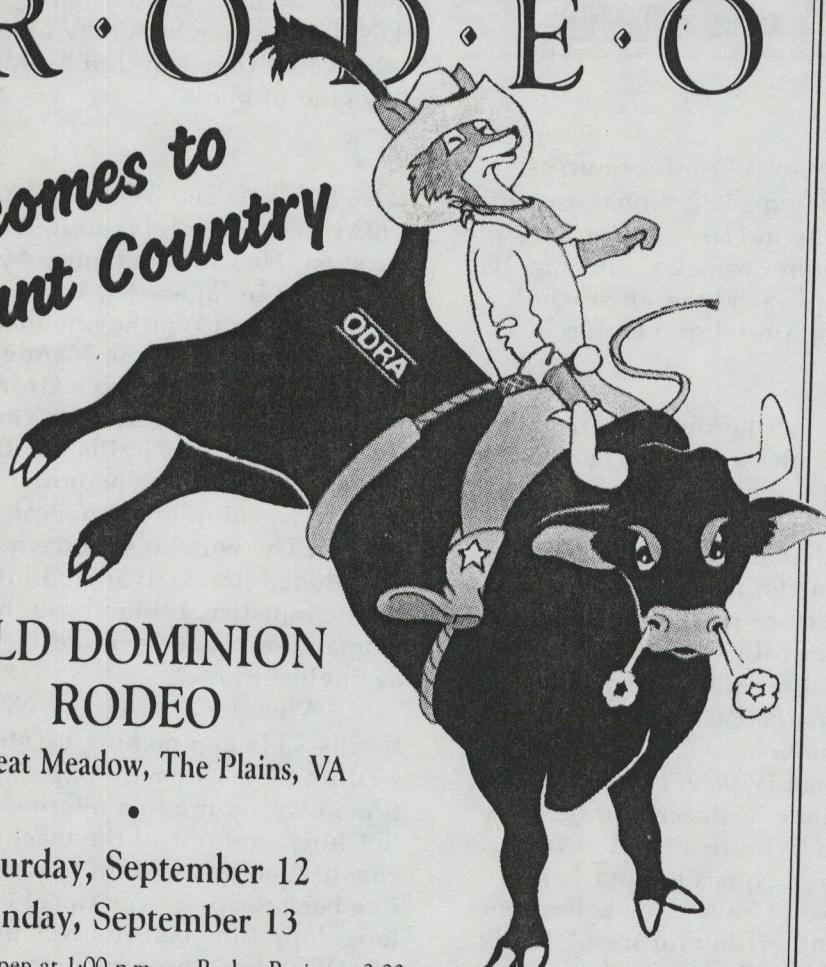
Whitney writes from nine in the morning to noon, six days a week. After a walk and a nap, she takes phone calls and attends to correspondence. She employs no secretary, preferring to answer her fan mail herself. "Some of the letters are *beautiful*," she says. "I try to do one letter a day, but they pile up and sometimes it's three months before I answer. But I'd rather do it that way than get a little form thing like some writers send out."

When Whitney goes "hunting" for a new book, she now prefers to travel by car. Her daughter and son-in-law serve as expedition drivers and photographers. They take both stills and videos of the settings she chooses. "A place has to speak to me in some way," she says, "or it doesn't work."

Once she finds herself in communication with a place, she visits the local library where, inevitably, the librarians know her by reputation and are delighted to introduce her to residents who welcome her into their homes and

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provide her with "inside" local color. After a week, she returns home, the trunk of her car laden with "a ton" of background material that includes everything from Chamber of Commerce brochures to books on local history.

One of Whitney's pet peeves is the often-asked question: do you use a computer? The answer is a passionate "No! I think with my pencil," she says proudly. "I need that connection between my fingers and my brain." Although she types her manuscripts, all the ground work for her stories—her plot, characters, background research, chronology charts, theme and a list of possible titles—are penciled onto the pages of a small, worn leather notebook.

"Usually I start out knowing 'who dun it,'" she says. "Then I work out the whole story, although I don't know from scene to scene what I'm going to do because I want to surprise myself." But her newest book, *Ebony Swan*, set on Virginia's Northern Neck, was an exception. "I had picked out the guilty party, and about two-thirds of the way through, I discovered that person didn't do it at all! I surprised myself so much—I hope I will surprise the reader."

If Whitney resists high-tech word processing, she does rely on New Age "Hemi-Sync tapes" produced by her neighbor-down-the-ridge, the Monroe Institute. (In 1971, the Institute's founder, Robert Monroe, published a popular account of his own out-of-body-experiences called *Journeys out of the Body*.) Before moving to Virginia, Whitney's daughter Georgia and her husband had taken several seminars at the Institute. It was their enthusiastic descriptions of the area that inspired the move. Whitney, who listens to the tapes through a headset while she relaxes in a tweed recliner, describes them as "mechanical sounds which put different pitches in each ear and enables the two sides of the brain to work together."

Before she began using Hemi-Sync tapes, whenever she would come to an impasse in her writing,

she would lie down on her bed, close her eyes, and "watch the story happen." "But," she says, "that took a long time—maybe half an hour or so." Now when stuck, she turns to her headphones. "And within seconds, I have an answer."

The magic of Monroe's Hemi-Sync tapes, however, doesn't prevent the in-between-book blues. "Every time I finish a book and face this empty box of typewriter paper, I think, How can I do it again?" She shakes her head. "I don't know, I don't know. I always wonder how I can write that many words again."

But she does.

In her *Guide to Fiction Writing* she tells her secret: "It's easy. We need write only one page at a time. For all the months of writing that lie ahead, that's all that's required of us—one page, and then another. It's astonishing how they pile up."

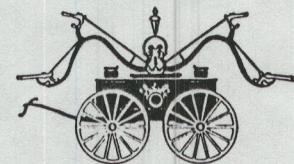


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